



# Preschool Program Guidance

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## Introduction

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Preschool Program Guidance supports instructional and best practices in preschool programs, Local Education Agency's (LEA), and community-based programs. This guidance document can be used in conjunction with the Blended Program Guidance developed by the Department. The intent of this guidance is to help preschool programs establish high-quality instruction and best practices within their programs. This document is a resource guide and a starting point for programs that would like to know more about starting a program or improving one that already exists. Programs should consider these different aspects when establishing a high-quality preschool. For the purposes of this document, preschool-age children are children who are one or two years from kindergarten eligibility. However, it is important to note that some funding streams may have more specific age requirements.

## **Early Care and Education in Missouri**

On January 28, 2021, Governor Mike Parson and the Missouri Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education, Health and Senior Services, and Social Services announced that nearly all early childhood programs across state government would be consolidated in a single Office of Childhood. Previously, each state agency provided various services for children and families. The transition to one office allows early childhood work across state government to become more streamlined and effective. This Office ensures children and families across the state have better access to more consistent, quality programs and services. DESE houses the new Office, which provides a comprehensive approach to early childhood care and education, including all programs related to child care, home visiting, early learning, preschool, afterschool, and early intervention. DESE's commitment to early care and education (ECE) is evident in the DESE Show Me Success strategic plan as Early Learning and Early Literacy are among the four priority areas. Moving forward, DESE is excited to remain committed to early care and education, as shown in the Show Me Success strategic plan.

## **Why is Preschool Important?**

High-quality preschool experiences provide positive educational and social outcomes for children and their families. Children who participate in ECE programming tend to experience educational, health, social emotional, and economic benefits. In the short term, ECE program participants are more ready for school, experience fewer behavioral challenges, earn higher grades throughout elementary and middle school (particularly in reading and math), and are less likely to repeat any grade. In the long-term, ECE program participants have improved social skills, are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, receive higher pay/earnings in adulthood, and are less likely to engage in criminal activity across their lifetimes. Children from families with limited or no income benefit most from ECE program participation. In addition to the positive social and emotional outcome for children and families, research has consistently shown that the economic benefits of ECE programming are more generous than almost any other educational or social intervention. The ratio of benefits to costs for universal programs exceeds 3 to 1, at minimum. This means that for every dollar invested in universal programs and services, the benefit to participants and society is worth at least \$3. The economic paybacks of targeted programs are even greater. The ratio of benefits to costs for targeted programs often exceeds 7 to 1. For every dollar invested in targeted programming, an economic benefit is worth at least \$7. The combination of positive outcomes for children and families, in addition to the financial benefits, makes high-quality preschool an essential component of a successful ECE system.



## Developmentally Appropriate Practice

An effective teacher or family child care provider chooses a strategy to fit a particular situation. It is important to consider what the children already know and can do and the learning goals for the specific situation. By remaining flexible and observant, you can determine which strategy may be most effective. Often, if one strategy does not work, another will.

These [10 Effective Developmentally Appropriate Practice Strategies from National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) will help you implement Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

1. **Acknowledge** what children say or do.
2. **Encourage** persistence and effort rather than just praising and evaluating what the child has done.
3. **Give specific feedback** rather than general comments.
4. **Model** attitudes, ways of approaching problems, and behavior toward others, showing children rather than just telling them.
5. **Demonstrate** the correct way to do something.
6. **Create or add challenge** so that a task goes a bit, beyond what the children can already do.
7. **Ask questions** that provoke children's thinking.
8. **Give assistance** (such as a cue or hint) to help children work on the edge of their current competence.
9. **Provide information**, directly giving children facts, verbal labels, and other information.
10. **Give directions** for children's action or behavior.

## **Developmental Screening**

A doctor, nurse, or other professional in healthcare, early childhood education, community, or school setting in collaboration with parents and caregivers can deliver developmental monitoring and screening. ECE professionals play a vital role in developmental monitoring by observing how a child grows and changes over time to meet developmental milestones. ECE professionals also assist in developmental screenings by looking at how a child is developing in a more formal process by using a developmental screening instrument to identify possible developmental delays that may need further evaluation.

To learn more about how ECE professionals can assist with developmental monitoring and screening, visit the [CDC Developmental Monitoring and Screening for Health Professionals](#).

## **Assessment**

Assessment is the ongoing process of documenting evidence of early learning to make informed instructional decisions. This evidence may include anecdotal records of children's conversations and behaviors in individual, small- and large groups, samples of artwork and drawings, and photographs, recordings, or other records of children engaged in activities and play. Programs should assess children with authentic, reliable, and valid assessments.



## School Readiness

Children entering school for the first time bring with them a unique set of skills and behaviors based on personal characteristics and experiences. Assessing the development of all children from birth to school entry allows families and community agencies to identify concerns and provide additional support to be responsive to the child's needs. These early experiences help prepare the child for school. Multiple factors influence school readiness, including family, community, ECE services, and schools. Missouri's definition of school readiness addresses how each of these factors impact children entering school.

For **children**, school readiness is being prepared in key dimensions of early learning and development (social and emotional, language and literacy, cognitive, motor, health and physical well-being, and positive attitudes and behaviors toward learning).

For **families**, school readiness is providing a safe environment for children to grow and learn and an understanding of their children's current health and development.

For **communities**, school readiness is providing families with access to community resources and valuing the critical role of early learning.

For **early care & education (ECE)** services, school readiness is having a variety of services available to all families in the community and providing services based on the families' needs.

For **schools**, school readiness is providing a welcoming and accepting environment for all children, and having educators who consistently advance student growth and achievement while working in partnership with families.

To learn more about school readiness including Missouri's School Readiness Indicators, visit [Missouri's Early Care & Education Early Connections](#).



## Preschool Funding

Depending on individual program needs, there are several sources for funding preschool in Missouri. The sources include federal, state, and local funding options. Each program will need to determine which funding stream is appropriate for its program. It is important to remember that each funding stream has its own set of requirements that programs will need to reference when planning.

## Funding Sources

Funding sources may include:

**Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE):** State and federal funds to support services for students with disabilities.

*Note: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines students with disabilities as those children, ages three (3) to twenty-one (21), who have been properly evaluated as having Intellectual Disability, Hearing Impairments and Deafness, Speech or Language Impairments, Visual Impairments including Blindness, Emotional Disturbance, Orthopedic Impairments, Autism, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impairments, a Specific Learning Disability, Deaf Blindness, or Multiple Disabilities and, who because of that disability, require special education and related services. As allowed under 34 CFR 300.87 implementing IDEA, the State of Missouri also defines a child with a disability to include ages three (3) through five (5) who have been properly identified as a young child with a developmental delay.*

**Title I Preschool:** Federal funds to support low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. To help all children succeed in kindergarten and primary grades, Title I. funds may provide pre-school education. Title I. preschool programs are designed for educationally disadvantaged three and four-year-old children. Educationally disadvantaged children are children whose educational attainment is below the level appropriate for children of their age.

**Prekindergarten students claimed in the Foundation Formula:** This funding allows districts or charter schools to claim a portion of their prekindergarten students in the Foundation Formulation. In order to be eligible to be claimed in Average Daily Attendance (ADA) used in the Foundation Formula, a prekindergarten pupil must reach the age of three before the first day of August of the school year beginning in that calendar year.

**Child Care Subsidy:** Child care providers can register with DESE to receive payment for care provided to subsidy eligible children.

**Tuition/Scholarships/Grants:** LEA's can use tuition fees, scholarships, and grant funds to fund preschool programs.

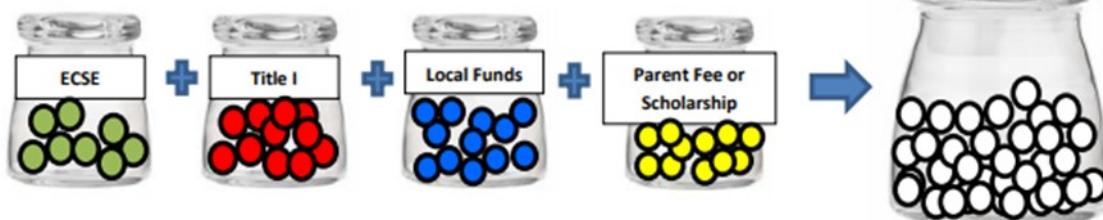
*Note: Programs should ensure funding streams allow the collection of tuition.*

## Early Learning Blended Program

Blended funding occurs when the educational costs for a group of children representing various eligibility types share and support two or more funding sources to ensure consistency, eliminate duplication of services, allow for maximum flexibility of funds, and reduce burden. There is no new Federal or State funding available through DESE for a blended program. Instead, blended programs use existing resources to support increased access for children to inclusive early learning programs.

To learn more about pooling funds to create an early learning blended program, visit [Blended Program](#).

*Example:*





## Program Quality

The Department believes high expectations, a clear vision, and a few focused, high-impact goals are critical to drive the improvement efforts necessary to bring about positive results. Programs can measure the effectiveness of early learning experiences through self-assessments using Environmental Rating Scale, Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Department-approved classroom environmental assessment, or Parents as Teachers National Center Quality Endorsement and Improvement Process.

## **Licensure**

Licensing holds programs accountable for the health and safety of the program. [The Licensing Rules for Group Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers](#) are available through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

## **Accreditation**

If seeking accreditation, programs should obtain it through either Missouri Accreditation (MOA) or the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). When choosing an accrediting source, programs should consider requirements and how they align with their program. Please note that the [Child Care Subsidy Program recognizes additional accrediting organizations](#).

### **Missouri Accreditation (MOA)**

Missouri Accreditation functions in areas beyond the scope of state licensing for early childhood and school age programming. To receive accreditation, a program must exceed the minimum licensing requirements. Missouri Accreditation focuses on qualitative aspects of the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth opportunities made available to children enrolled in center-based, home-based, school age care and education programs.

More information about [Missouri Accreditation](#).

### **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**

Achieving NAEYC Accreditation is a four-step process that involves self-reflection and quality improvement in order to meet and maintain accreditation over a five-year period. Directors, teachers, and families all participate in the process.

More information about [National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation](#).



## Classroom Environments

Program experiences for preschoolers are developmentally appropriate and are individualized based on the needs of each child. Families play an important role in working with the staff in developing the goals for their children.

### Preschoolers

- Interactions include open-ended questions such as *how, why, and what happens if*. Interactions are encouraged with direct, specific, and positive feedback about children's actions.
- Children are helped to cope with both success and failure through encouragement and assistance in expressing feelings using acceptable words or actions.
- Interactions are promoted among all children regardless of differences/abilities.

### Assessing Classroom Environments

Programs can use environmental rating scales to assess the quality of their classroom environments. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Third Edition (ECERS-3) is the latest version of one of the most widely used observational tools for assessing the quality of classrooms serving preschool-aged children.

## Staff Qualifications

All preschool programs are encouraged to utilize lead teachers and assistant teachers who have one of the following: an Early Childhood Certification or Early Childhood Special Education Certification at the time the program begins operation or at the time of hire. Instructional paraprofessionals/teacher assistants should meet either the preferred or the acceptable qualifications.

**Preferred qualification** - a child development associate's degree, associate's degree in early childhood, or sixty (60) college hours with a minimum of three (3) college credit hours in early childhood, child development, or child/family related courses and experience working in a program with young children and their families.

**Acceptable qualification** - must have 60 college hours or pass the state assessment for paraprofessionals.

*Programs should reference their funding stream requirements when deciding on teacher requirements.*

## Staff Evaluations

Programs are encouraged to evaluate staff performance at least annually and document the results. Input from families, supervisors, and other co-workers should be included in these evaluations.

## Professional Development

Professional development opportunities include college-credit courses through [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Missouri®](#), follow-up/advanced training of the selected curriculum model provided only by the approved curriculum source, professional conferences, seminars, consultants, and the DESE regional meetings. All licensed and accredited programs should refer to their respective licensure and accreditation bodies for specific professional development requirements.

## Teacher/Student Ratios

The maximum class size is 20 children per classroom while maintaining a ratio of one adult to ten children. Once the enrollment exceeds 10 children, there must be at least two staff in the classroom.

Ratio and group size depend on the needs of the children and the requirements of the individualized education program.

Age 3 to kindergarten entry:

7/1; with no more than 20 children in one room (preferred)  
10/1; with no more than 20 children in one room (acceptable)

## Missouri Early Learning Standards

The Missouri Early Learning Standards (MELS) are a framework of expectations for what children can do from infancy to kindergarten entry. Each standard includes a description of what the child may be doing to demonstrate meeting the standard and activities to give adults examples of ways to support the child in learning and mastering a skill or knowledge.

Using the MELS promotes the understanding of early learning and development, provides a comprehensive set of early childhood educational expectations for children's development and learning, and guides the design and implementation of curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices with young children.



# MISSOURI EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS (MELS)

Birth to Age Five



More information about the [Missouri Early Learning Standards](#).

## Curriculum

Approved preschool curriculum models and framework meets the following criteria based on being aligned with the Missouri Early Learning Standards, valid research, have positive evaluation results, provide ongoing professional development, and are developmentally appropriate for age-eligible children.

More information about [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education approved curriculums and framework](#).



## Transitions

For children and their parents, the transition from preschool to kindergarten is an exciting and daunting time. The successful coordination between preschool programs and kindergarten classrooms help lay the groundwork for a child's positive school experience.

### **Afterschool Programs**

Before- and after-school programs provide students with academic enrichment opportunities and activities designed to complement their regular school day's academic program during non-school hours. They provide a range of high-quality services to support student learning and development, including tutoring and mentoring, homework help, academic enrichment (such as hands-on math, reading/language arts, and science programs), community service opportunities, as well as music, arts, sports, and cultural activities. Afterschool programs incorporate a strong partnership of school, family, and community members that collaboratively contribute to the growth of students as they mature into caring, competent, and responsible adults.

More information about Missouri's [Afterschool Programs](#).

## Resources

### Developmentally Appropriate Practice

[10 Effective DAP Strategies from NAEYC](#)

### School Readiness

[Missouri's Early Care & Education Early Connections](#)

### Developmental Screening

[CDC Developmental Monitoring and Screening for Health Professionals](#)

### Preschool Funding Sources

[Early Childhood Special Education \(ECSE\)](#)

[Title I Preschool](#)

[Average Daily Attendance \(Foundation Formula\)](#)

[Child Care Subsidy](#)

### Early Learning Blended Program

[Blended Program](#)

### Licensure

[Licensing Rules for Group Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers](#)

### Accreditation

[Child Care Subsidy Program additional accrediting organizations](#)

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### Professional Development

[T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Missouri®](#)

### Afterschool Programs

[Missouri's Afterschool Programs](#)